

Honduras

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President Juan Orlando Hernández began his term in January 2014 by restructuring the cabinet and government ministries in an attempt to partially address the country's growing public deficit. Civil rights continued to erode in Honduras in 2014, as Congress passed a secrecy law that limits public access to government documents. Violence and intimidation against journalists increased, and the crisis over land for palm plantations in Bajo Aguán continued.

Honduras again had one of the highest homicide rates in the world as drug traffickers, organized criminals, and street gangs preyed upon society, often in collusion with authorities. Approximately 500 children were killed in the first six months of 2014, a crisis that was underscored by a record number of unaccompanied minors fleeing the country to escape violence.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 20 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 7 / 12

The president is elected by popular vote for a single four-year term. The leading candidate is only required to win a plurality; there is no runoff system. Members of the 128-seat, unicameral National Congress are also elected for four-year terms using proportional representation by department.

General elections held in November 2013 were the first since the controversial 2009 elections, which were overseen by an interim government following the coup that removed former president José Manuel Zelaya from office. In 2013, Hernández of the National Party (PN) won 36.8 percent of the vote in a field of eight candidates for president. Xiomara Castro of the Liberation and Refoundation Party (LIBRE) won 28.8 percent, followed by Liberal Party (PL) candidate Mauricio Villeda with 20 percent and Salvador Nasralla of the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC) with 14 percent. In the concurrent legislative elections, the PN won 47 seats, LIBRE won 39, the PL won 26, and the PAC won 13 seats; the Innovation and Unity Party, Democratic Unification Party, and Christian Democrats each won 1 seat.

Election observers noted a number of irregularities, including the harassment of international observers by immigration officials, vote buying, problems with voter rolls, and potential fraud in the transmission of tally sheets to the country's electoral body, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). More than a dozen LIBRE activists and candidates were murdered during the campaign season. Castro and the LIBRE party contested the results and demanded a recount, which the TSE partially conducted; in the end, nearly all complaints were rejected and the TSE certified Hernández's victory.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 9 / 16

Political parties are largely free to operate, though power has mostly been concentrated in the hands of the PL and the PN since the early 1980s. In 2013, LIBRE, the PAC, and the Patriotic Alliance Party (ALIANZA) all participated in elections for the first time, winning a significant share of the vote and disrupting the dominance of the PL and the PN.

In May 2014, military police used tear gas and batons against LIBRE leaders inside the congressional hall when supporters of former president Zelaya, a member of parliament, tried to force their way in during a protest.

After decades of military rule, the military remains powerful in Honduras. President Hernández's recent appointments of military officials to civilian posts, many related to security, underscores the continued influence.

Minorities are underrepresented in Honduras's political system. No representatives of the Garifuna people were elected to Congress in 2013; one English-speaking Afro-Honduran and one Misquito person won seats. No election materials were printed in indigenous languages. In 2014, the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Hondurans was folded into the Ministry for Social and Community Development, a move criticized by supporters of these communities.

C. Functioning of Government: 4 / 12

In 2014, the Hernández administration eliminated five cabinet-level ministries and created seven umbrella ministries in an effort to cut costs. The restructuring reduced the number of ministers from 38 to 15, which critics have argued concentrates power in too few hands.

Corruption remains a serious problem. According to a recent Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey, 23 percent of Hondurans were victims of corruption in 2014. Honduras was ranked 126 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The January 2014 approval of the Law on Classification of Public Documents, which allows information on public security and defense to be kept secret for up to 25 years, undermined transparency. Days after the law was approved, the legislature temporarily suspended it following protests by domestic and international rights groups. Despite the outcry, which included criticism that the legislation limits prospects for the investigation and prosecution of corruption, the law was reaffirmed in March.

In September, Mario Zelaya, former head of the Honduran Institute of Social Security (IHSS), and several other IHSS officials were arrested on charges related to the misappropriation of more than \$300 million in public funds. The arrests followed revelations

that Mario Catarino Rivas hospital in San Pedro Sula was being run by a criminal organization. President Hernández deployed military police to restore control of the hospital.

Civil Liberties: 29 / 60 (-2)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16 (-1)

Since the 2009 coup, authorities have systematically violated the constitution's press freedom guarantees. Numerous radio and television stations reported continued harassment in 2014, including police surveillance, assaults, threats, blocked transmissions, power outages, and government harassment of journalists. Dina Meza, an independent reporter, has been subject to stalking and surveillance since protesting the conviction of Julio Ernesto Alvarado, director of Radio Globo. Alvarado was sentenced to 16 months in prison and banned from work as a journalist in December 2013.

Honduras is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, with eight killed in 2014, up from three in 2013. The impunity rate in cases of murdered journalists is 95 percent. In 2014, legislation was introduced to create a council to protect journalists, human rights workers, and others working in high-risk fields.

Media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful business interests. Internet use is generally unrestricted. Freedom of religion is broadly respected.

Academic freedom has been under increasing threat since the 2009 coup, as teachers' unions have been targeted by state violence and repression. Educators were also subject to extortion by gang members, who controlled all or parts of schools in some areas. Scholars have faced pressure to support the privatization of the national university. In March 2014, the government launched the Guardians of the Homeland program, which it described as an educational program targeting at-risk youth. Led by the Honduran armed forces, the program has provided civic and religious education to some 25,000 children. Critics, however, have argued that it violates the rights of children by militarizing youth and promoting violence.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 6 / 12

Constitutional guarantees of freedoms of assembly and association have not been consistently upheld. Violence and threats against protesters are continual problems. In 2013, police used tear gas against indigenous protesters, mostly from the Lenca community, of the Agua Zarca dam project. The next day, Lenca leader Berta Cáceres was arrested on charges that were ultimately dismissed in 2014. The military killed Lenca leader Tomás García in 2013 during a protest against Agua Zarca, and indigenous activist Justo Sorto was murdered in January 2014. The 2006 Citizen Participation Law protects the role of civil society groups and individuals in the democratic process. However, human rights defenders and political activists continued to face significant threats in 2014, including harassment, surveillance, and detentions, as well as the murder of a number of coup opponents.

In January 2014, the Unit for Registering and Monitoring Civil Associations revoked the status of approximately 4,800 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for failing to provide the government with annual reports on their finances and programs. The status of an additional 5,400 NGOs was revoked in March. Some NGOs have suggested the move was intended to silence criticism. After widespread pressure from civil society representatives, the Hernández administration rescinded the resolution shortly thereafter.

Labor unions are well organized and can strike, though labor actions often result in clashes with security forces. Threats against union leaders and blacklisting of employees who sought to form unions remained problems. In 2014, the International Labour Organization agreed to send an assessment team to Honduras to evaluate union rights violations, including violations of the right to strike, unpaid wages, and wrongful dismissals.

F. Rule of Law: 5 / 16

Congress and business elites exert excessive influence over the Honduran judiciary, including the Supreme Court and its decisions. Judges are removed from their posts arbitrarily and a number of legal professionals have been killed in recent years. In 2012, Congress violated the constitution by voting to remove four of the five justices in the Supreme Court's constitutional chamber after it ruled several laws unconstitutional. In January 2013, Congress passed the laws that had been struck down, as well as legislation aimed at asserting Congress's supremacy by allowing it to remove any elected official. It also passed laws restricting the ability of judges in the Supreme Court's constitutional chamber to participate in deliberations of the full court should they fail to reach a unanimous decision, and removed the right of citizens to challenge the constitutionality of laws.

Army officers have been found guilty of involvement in drug trafficking and other crimes. The police force is highly corrupt, and officers engage in criminal activities including drug trafficking and extortion. Police officers have committed extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and illegal searches. In August 2013, four police officers were convicted in the killing of two men. In January 2014, Congress abolished the Commission to Reform Public Security, which had been charged with establishing procedures for national police reform.

According to the government, approximately 80 percent of crimes committed in Honduras are never reported, and police investigate only 4 percent of reported crimes. The vast majority of inmates are still awaiting trial. Prison conditions are harsh, the facilities are notoriously overcrowded, and the state routinely permits prisoners to be in charge of disciplining other inmates. As of September 2014, six lawyers had been murdered since the start of the year.

Although there is an official human rights ombudsman, critics claim that the work of the office is politicized. The ombudsman not only supported and justified the 2009 coup, but also publicly declared his opposition to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up to examine the coup and rights abuses in its aftermath.

In 2014, Honduras continued to have one of the highest murder rates in the world, though at the close of the year, the National University reported a reduction in the homicide rate to approximately 69 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Discrepancies in homicide data between the Violence Observatory of the National Autonomous University of Honduras and a new data collection agency managed by the police resulted in allegations that the police were manipulating homicide rates. Most murders are attributed to organized crime, including transnational youth gangs and Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates. The government has made membership in a gang punishable by up to 12 years in prison. Hundreds of juveniles have reportedly been killed in “social cleansing” campaigns.

The government continued to rely on the military to fight crime in 2014. In December, Hernández appointed an active army general, Julian Pacheco Tinoco, as security minister in an effort to control violence. Critics contend that too much power is being concentrated in the hands of the military.

Discrimination against the indigenous and Afro-Honduran populations is widespread, as are poverty and socioeconomic exclusion.

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community faces discrimination, harassment, and physical threats. A 2005 constitutional amendment prohibits same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption. Rights groups report that at least 178 LGBT activists and individuals have been murdered since the 2009 coup. Since 2011, a special unit in the attorney general's office has been in charge of investigating crimes against the LGBT community, and the police has a Sexual Diversity Unit. However, according to a 2014 study conducted by a coalition of human rights groups, police officers and gang members carry out most of the violence against members of the LGBT community.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16 (–1)

Honduras's ongoing violence and impunity have reduced personal autonomy for the average citizen. Those living in particularly violent neighborhoods may be forced to abandon their homes and businesses. Children have been fleeing the country to avoid forced recruitment into gangs.

The conflict over fertile land where lucrative palm plantations are located in the Bajo Aguán region in northern Honduras persisted in 2014, with clashes among peasants, landowners' private security forces, and state forces. More than 50 people, mostly landless peasants, have died in the conflict since 2009. A 2013 report implicated military death squads in some of the killings. In May 2014, military, police, and private security guards forcibly evicted two communities. The same month, Cerrito Lindo activist Orlando Orellana, whose community had been involved in a land dispute with a local company, and the mayor of Iriona, where illegal trafficking and logging occur, were both murdered in separate incidents.

Indigenous and Afro-Honduran residents have faced various abuses at the hands of property developers and their allies in recent years, including corrupt titling processes and acts of violence. The clearing of land for clandestine airstrips used in the drug trade has

increased pressure on indigenous groups in remote areas of the country. In July 2014, Miriam Miranda, coordinator of the Honduran Black Fraternal Organization, and about 20 other members of the Garifuna community were kidnapped in Vallecito after they discovered that traffickers were rebuilding a secret runway. Traffickers and organized crime syndicates are also engaged in illegal mining and deforestation. In 2014 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights began hearing a case brought by the Garifuna Punta Piedra community, which alleges that the government violated their land.

Violence against women is a serious problem, and femicide has risen dramatically in recent years. These murders, like most homicides in Honduras, go unpunished, despite the fact that femicide was added as a crime to the penal code in 2013. Women also remain vulnerable to exploitation by employers, particularly in the low-wage *maquiladora* (assembly plant) export sector. Following the 2013 elections, 35 of 128 seats in Congress were held by women; only 22 of 298 mayoralities were held by women.

Child labor is a problem in rural areas and in the informal economy. Honduras is both a source and transit country for human trafficking, and women and children are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. A 2012 antitrafficking law established new penalties for forced labor and prostitution of adults. Honduras was placed on the Tier 2 Watch List in the U.S. Department of State's 2014 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, which noted increased law enforcement efforts but also cited problems with data collection and heavy reliance on civil society to provide victims' services.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology